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ABSTRACT

Examples are provided in this discussion to indicate the nature of professional judgment in a teaching situation likely to be encountered by most child care workers or preschool teachers. Specifically, this predicament involves a problem in turn taking among 4-year-olds. As used here, the term "professional judgment" refers to cognitive processes involving the use of advanced knowledge (such as diagnosing and analyzing events, weighing alternative courses of action, and estimating the potential long-term consequences of momentary actions and decisions). Types of professional judgment processes a teacher might engage in can be thought of in terms of three interrelated categories: (1) skills and knowledge that could be taught in the problem situation, (2) clinical questions related to individuals in the problem incident, and (3) curriculum and management concerns. The nature of professional judgments can be clearly seen when such judgments are contrasted with nonprofessional and unprofessional responses, which might be made by untrained individuals. (RH)

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THE PROFESSIONAL PRESCHOOL TEACHER

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Paper presented at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Atlanta, GA, November 3-6, 1983).

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INTRODUCTION

The term "professional" means many things to many people (cf. Ade, 1982; Hoyle, 1982). While not all of these meanings can be fruitfully explored in this paper, for the purposes of this discussion the aspects of professionalism of chief concern are the application of advanced knowledge to one's work (Zumeta & Solomon, 1982), the use of judgment based on that advanced knowledge, and the adoption of standards of performance below which no professional member's performance may be allowed to fall.

As defined here, the advanced knowledge applied to the professional preprimary teacher's work is derived from developmental psychology and is drawn largely from research on children's development of social cognition. However, a full description of the work of preschool teachers would surely show that it involves the application of advanced knowledge from many other fields as well.

The term "judgment" is used here to refer to such cognitive processes as diagnosing and analyzing events, weighing alternative courses of action, estimating the potential long term consequences of momentary actions and decisions, and other information processing in which advanced knowledge comes into play.

In the matter of setting standards of performance, the distinction between a professional and an amateur may be useful: an amateur does what she does "for the love of it," perhaps occasionally when she feels like it, and without remuneration. On occasion, the amateur may be very skillful indeed, even though not necessarily formally trained. However, a

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practicing professional is (ideally) committed to performing at the same high standards, whether in the mood or not, on every occasion, and whether she feels like it or not. Indeed, one of the major functions of a professional organization is to set standards of performance. These standards are established to offer guidelines for the typical situations all members of the profession can be expected to encounter and are based on the best available advanced knowledge and practices.

Outlined below are some speculations concerning how a professional preschool teacher or child care worker might respond to a typical situation encountered during her work. The examples are intended to show what professional judgment might be like in a very ordinary teaching situation. These responses are contrasted with those of a person without training, and a few points are also added concerning what might constitute unprofessional responses to the same situation.

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSES IN A STANDARD PREDICAMENT

In order to explore what professional judgment might include, let us take a situation that almost every teacher of young children is bound to encounter sooner or later--and probably often. To set the stage, imagine a teacher of about 20 4-year-olds whose outdoor equipment includes only two tricycles! In a group of 20 American 4-year-olds in such a situation, squabbles will inevitably arise concerning whose turn it is to use one of them.

Specifically, imagine that a child named Robin goes to the teacher and protests, saying, "Leslie won't let me have a turn!" There are probably scores of "right" as well as "wrong" ways to respond in this situation. The types of professional judgment processes a teacher might engage in are presented below under three interrelated headings. Specifically, these

discussions focus on what could be taught in the situation, clinical questions relating to individuals in the incident, and curriculum and management concerns.

What Could Be Taught in This Situation?

Ideally, a trained teacher approaches the situation described by asking herself, What can I be teaching?* In formulating answers to this question, the professionally trained teacher takes into account the most reliable knowledge about the development of children; the norms of the age group; and the goals of the parents, the school, and the community at large.

The teacher's answers to the question should involve some of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions outlined below. The specific content of these skills, knowledge, and dispositions may vary with the "philosophy of education," "learning theory," and goals to which the individual teacher or preschool subscribes. Those listed below reflect the author's own views of the kinds of learning and teaching that seem appropriate at the preprimary level.

The examples of professional responses presented here depict the kind of judgment that might be expected of a well-trained, experienced teacher at the developmental stage referred to as "maturity" (Katz, 1972). Needless to say, the mature and experienced teacher formulates her judgment of the situation very rapidly--in a manner sometimes thought of as "intuitively" (i.e., processing large amounts of information, concepts, knowledge, etc. at great speed). A professional judgment of the situation

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*The increasing number of male teachers in the early childhood area is indeed welcome. However, since most preprimary teachers continue to be female, the feminine pronoun has been used throughout this discussion.

could lead the teacher to answer the question, What can I be teaching? along the lines described below.

Social skills. Certainly the teacher may encourage the development of skills in the social realm. Some of the social skills that might be taught include turn-taking skills, negotiating skills, and coping skills.

1. Turn-taking skills

The teacher can assist in the complex processes of learning to "read" others' behaviors for signs of when a request for a turn is most likely to work, when to give up, and when to come back for another try. Sensitivity may also be encouraged to similar cues, embedded in another's behavior, that help decide the next best move. Such processes are analogous to those studied in discourse analysis describing how young children learn the turn-taking skills required for participation in conversation (cf. Shields, 1979; Wells, 1981; Fredericksen, 1981).

Thus the teacher might suggest to Robin that he or she simply wait a few minutes, do something else for a little while, and then try asking Leslie again for a turn. She might also suggest to Robin that Leslie be observed for signs of weariness or boredom with the tricycle, indicating that a bid for a turn as soon as such signs appear is likely to be successful. In such a case, the teacher is helping Robin to strengthen observational skills that could aid the turn-taking process.

2. Negotiating skills

The growing literature on social cognition and its development indicates that children during the preschool period can begin to hone the skills involved in striking up a bargain (i.e.,

being able to guess what will appeal to another child and how to make a deal in which each participant's preferences or needs are considered [cf. Rubin & Everett, 1982]).

In such a case, the teacher encourages Robin to consider what might appeal to Leslie. Specifically, the teacher might say to Robin, "Go to Leslie and say 'I'll push you on the swing if you give me a turn on the tricycle, etc.'" In this way, the teacher offers a verbal model of how the negotiating session might go.

3. Coping skills

A teacher has a role to play in helping children to cope with having their requests, pleas, demands, and so forth turned down or rejected. Children do not have to win every conflict or succeed at every confrontation, and the ability to accept defeat and rejection gracefully probably has to be learned.

The teacher can help Robin to learn this skill by responding to the complaint by saying (in a matter-of-fact tone) something like, "All right. Perhaps Leslie will change his or her mind later. There are lots of other things to do in the meantime . . ." Specific activities can then be suggested.

Verbal skills. The tricycle situation is also a good one in which to teach children how to express their feelings and assert their wishes more clearly and effectively.

1. Assertive phrases

It might be that Robin has not stated his or her desire for a turn with the tricycle very clearly. Perhaps Robin simply tugged at the tricycle or even whined a bit. The teacher can

respond to Robin's complaint by saying something like, "Go back to Leslie and say (modeling a mildly assertive tone), 'I've been waiting a long time. I really want a turn . . .'" In such a case, the teacher introduces a simple phrase that the child can use when the teacher is not there and models a tone of moderate but firm assertiveness the child can try to use.

2. Conversational phrases

It may be that the children involved in the incident have few appropriate phrases and are only just learning to engage in heated conversations. In a study of how young children become friends, Gottman (1983) has shown that a factor in success at friendship formation is the ability to de-escalate conflict situations. Those children able to do so were able to state their reasons for disagreeing with each other (Gottman, 1983, pp. 26-27). The professional preprimary teacher is in an ideal position to help children acquire some of the skills involved in verbalizing conflicting wishes and opinions. Teaching such verbal skills can be done through a technique called Speaking-for-Children (cf. Schachter & Strage, 1982), a process in which the adult speaks to each child on behalf of the other. The teacher keeps up the conversation between two contentious parties by speaking for them. In this way, the teacher offers phrases and models a verbal approach to a conflict situation.

Using this technique, the teacher might say to Leslie, "Robin really wants a turn," to which Leslie might grunt a refusal. The teacher then might say to Robin something like, "Leslie does not want to give up the tricycle yet." Robin might

respond to this with a whining protest, in which case the teacher can paraphrase to Leslie what Robin is feeling by saying, "Robin really would like a turn now," and so on.

Social knowledge. This typical preschool incident provides a good opportunity to teach social knowledge. Nucci and Turiel (1978) have shown that preschool children understand the distinction between social conventions and moral transgressions and thus can be helped with simple moral and social insights. The preschool teacher is in an ideal position in situations like the one in our example to stimulate and strengthen children's knowledge of such social concepts. Some examples are outlined below.

1. Social perspective

A professionally trained teacher can help children to learn some distinctions between what is a tragedy and what is not. Not getting a turn to ride a tricycle on a given day is not a tragedy. Loss of a loved one or separation from a very favorite friend or pet might be tragic. The teacher helps the child put desires and wishes into perspective by responding to the complaint with gentle, good-humored empathy, rather than with tragic tones or a great rush to rescue the child from distress.

Thus the teacher might say to Robin something like, "I know you're disappointed not to get a turn on the tricycle, but there are other things you like doing, etc." Once again, the tone should be matter-of-fact and pleasant, without hint of reprimand.

2. Rudiments of justice

There is reason to believe that preschoolers are ready to absorb some of the rudiments of justice (Johnson, 1982), particularly in the form of "ground rules" (i.e., the notion that the rules and restraints a child is asked to observe are asked of others too). Thus a professionally trained teacher's response here would not be merely "Leslie, I want you to give Robin a turn now." This statement would also be followed by the tag "And when you need help getting a turn with something, I will be glad to help you also."

Similarly, if the situation were to lead to combat, the teacher might say to the instigator, "I won't let you hit X, and I won't let anyone hit you either." The last part of such a statement is what reassures the aggressor that he or she is in a just environment in which everyone's rights are protected and everyone's needs are considered. One of the important elements of professional behavior illustrated here is the teacher's acceptance of responsibility for the learning and development of both the victim and the aggressor (see also Grusec & Arnason, 1982). Thus when Leslie hogs the tricycle and refuses to give Robin a turn (and when other techniques have failed), the teacher might say to Leslie, "Five more minutes, Leslie, then I want you to let Robin have a turn, and when you need help with something just let me know."

3. Observers' understandings and skills

Professional judgment also includes taking into account what the children observing the incident might be learning. Virtually

all the teacher responses outlined above can provide indirect instruction for uninvolved children, who are just watching the incident from the sidelines. These children might also learn techniques of negotiation, bargaining, and verbal strategies for use in confrontation. In addition, the observing children might be learning what techniques or strategies "work" with which children. If they have also had an opportunity to observe the teacher state the ground rules, they are likely to feel reassured that they are in a just environment and, while they are prohibited from harming others, that others are similarly constrained against harming them.

Dispositional learning. In addition to teaching social skills and social knowledge, the professional teacher also considers which personal dispositions could be strengthened or weakened in this situation.

1. Empathic and altruistic dispositions

A professionally trained teacher is aware of the accumulating evidence that young children are capable of empathic and altruistic dispositions and that adults can strengthen these dispositions in various ways (cf. Grusec & Arnason, 1982). For example, if Leslie resists giving up the tricycle, the teacher might say something like, "Robin has been waiting for a long time, and you know how it feels to wait a long time," thereby stimulating or arousing empathic feelings and nurturing the disposition to be charitable as well. This should not be said in such a tone as to imply "sin" or hidden evil impulses, of course!

Sometimes a child refuses to accede to the request of another precisely because he or she does know what it feels like

to be in the other's position (e.g., to have to wait for a long time). In such cases empathic capabilities are there, but charity is not. It is not very useful for the adults in such situations to say things like, "How would you like someone to do that to you?" What answer can a young child give to such a question? In cases in which charity toward the victim is lacking, the teacher must exercise judgment concerning how to respond in the best and long term interests of both children. Of course, confrontations like these may be inevitable and benign; their significance should not be exaggerated or overinterpreted.

2. Experimental disposition

The tricycle incident is a good example of the many situations arising with young children in which the teacher can strengthen children's dispositions to approach social situations and confrontations experimentally, as problem-solving situations in which alternative solutions can be invented and tried out and in which a few failures will not be debilitating.

Returning to the incident, then, when Robin complains that Leslie won't give up a turn, the teacher can respond by modeling a mildly assertive tone and saying something like, "Go back and say to Leslie, 'I really want a turn. I've been waiting a long time.' If that doesn't work, come back and we'll think of something else to try." If the teacher suggests what action to take without adding the notion of coming back to try again, and if that one suggestion fails, Robin's frustration or sense of incompetence may be increased. The tag in the teacher's statement ("come back and we'll think of something else to try")

strengthens the disposition to tackle social situations experimentally and can be of value to children in the long term.

3. Complaining and tattling

Professional judgment may indicate, for example, that Robin has acquired a strong disposition to be a complainer and that this tendency should be weakened. The professionally trained teacher tries to assess the legitimacy of complaints and to discriminate between those requiring action and those lodged by the child in order to secure something wanted rather than needed. If, in the teacher's best judgment, the complaint requires no real intervention, Robin may be sent back to the situation with some suggested strategies for coping with it, as already outlined above. Complainers do not always have to win or succeed at their complaints; if they do succeed often, complaining can become a strong and persistent disposition.

The term "tattling" refers to behavior in one child that is intended to get another one into trouble. Very often, behavior that appears to be tattling on the part of the young child may simply reflect a childlike understanding of the seriousness of the teacher's demands. The teacher must assess whether the child is simply reporting what he or she thinks the teacher wants to know about--or whether the intent is to get another child into trouble and whether the disposition to do so is growing. In the latter case, the teacher may decide to weaken this disposition by sending the child back to cope with the conflict. When children are older, perhaps 6 or 7 years of age, the teacher can explain the conditions under which behavior that we ordinarily think of

as "tattling" is warranted (e.g., when the consequence of some activity unknown to the teacher may constitute a physical or psychological danger to someone).

Clinical Judgments

The term "clinical" as defined here indicates the processes of taking into account the meaning of the behavior of each individual child involved in a particular incident. The professionally trained teacher attempts to put the behavior in a specific incident into the context of all other known behavior and history of the individuals involved. Thus the teacher might ask (subliminally of course) some of the following kinds of questions:

Is this a typical day for Robin? If so, is Robin a chronic attention seeker? Is Robin's threshold of attention perceiving too high? If so, how can it be brought down?

How much experimentation can Robin take at this time? Perhaps his or her disposition to be self-assertive is not yet robust enough to risk failure or rejection right now, and the teacher judges that Robin requires intervention and/or support in this particular confrontation at this particular time.

Does Leslie's behavior reflect progress? Perhaps this is the first time Leslie has exhibited self-assertion, and this incident is a welcome sign that earlier shyness or submissiveness is being overcome.

Can the two individuals in this particular incident learn the "right" things if they are left to resolve the situation for themselves? Some children can learn more mature and effective ways

to resolve problems when left to their own devices, while others cannot. Thus the teacher might also ask, When should I use a partial intervention? Should I keep completely out of the way? One of the important factors the professional teacher considers here is that if one of the participating children is a bully, he or she may get better at bullying by being left to resolve the conflict alone. In the children's own long term interests, the teacher will try to minimize the success of the bully or bossy child.

Will the present pattern of behavior of either of the two children involved cause them trouble later on if it is left unamended now?

Are either of these children the victim of "character definition?" That is to say, have these children's characters been defined (e.g., Leslie as selfish bully or Robin as whining weakling) so that they are bringing their behavior into line with the traits attributed to them (cf. Grusec & Arnason, 1982)?

Curriculum and Management Considerations

As well as considering the skills and dispositions that can be encouraged and the clinical judgments that may be made, the professionally trained teacher will take into account the implications of the situation for curriculum and management. Specifically, the teacher might take up such questions as

Is the behavior in this incident "normal" for this age group? In this culture? In the culture of the particular children involved? The trained teacher knows that heavy doses of preaching and

moralizing are unlikely methods with which to treat the behavior of young children. However, the teacher may select certain kinds of stories to tell the children which carry a relevant moral at an appropriate level of complexity.

Have I provided the right kind and/or quantity of equipment for children of this age, background, culture, and so forth? Are there enough suitable alternative activities? Is the curriculum sufficiently appropriate and challenging for the two children in the incident or in other incidents of the same kind?

The professional teacher is likely to ask herself how often a particular kind of incident is occurring and whether its frequency signals a need for adjustment of the curriculum. If these kinds of "run-ins" occur several times every day, it suggests that the curriculum should be evaluated and some efforts should be made to provide activities to engage the children's minds more fully. In handling a typical situation, the teacher can thus address not only the individual children involved but also the program as a whole. Such program decisions include bringing knowledge of development and learning to bear on formulating responses to children's behavior and in making teaching decisions. The professional also considers the long term development of the children involved and not just the incident and the behavior of the moment. In addition, the professional considers the growth, development, and learning of <u>all</u> the children involved in the incident: that of both the participants'--the apparent aggressor's and the apparent victim's--as well as that of the children observing.

NONPROFESSIONAL RESPONSES TO THE INCIDENT

Many people without professional education are involved with children in groups. In many preprimary settings, parents and volunteers contribute greatly to the quality of the program by their participation. The term "nonprofessional" implies no inferiority; the term is used in order to contrast the application of knowledge and professionally accrued experience and practices with common-sense responses and to focus attention on how training and judgment come into play in daily work with other people's children.

In order to explore this contrast, let us imagine how the person without professional education and experience might respond when confronted with our hypothetical situation. My impression is that the untrained individual is likely to focus on what is happening rather than what is being learned. Similarly, she is likely to see the situation as calling for "putting out the fire," hoping that will be the end of it, rather than for teaching a variety of skills, knowledge, or dispositions. In other words, the nonprofessional may wish simply to put a stop to the incident without considering which of many possible interventions is most likely to stimulate long term development and learning. (If teachers took the same approach and saw teaching as periodic--if not inevitable--fire-extinguishing, they would be "smoke detectors" rather than teachers!)

Many people without the benefit of professional education and experience might see the preferred response to our incident to be to distract Robin from his or her misery. The use of distraction makes "good common sense." Distraction very often does work and is therefore a favored technique. However, for 3- or 4-year-olds it is not a necessary or preferred technique. While distraction "works," it does not really teach

alternative approaches to the situation. On the contrary, it may teach children that complaining, tattling, and so forth very frequently get adult attention.

Other nonprofessional responses in situations like the tricycle squabble include saying such things to the children as, "Cut it out!" "Don't be so selfish!" "Be nice!" "We take turns in this school!" (even though we just didn't), "Don't be nasty!" and so on. Such exclamations are unlikely to do any harm, but they also are unlikely to teach the participants alternative approaches to the situation. Some nonprofessionals also respond to squabbling over equipment by putting it away or locking it up. This does "work," of course, but it does not teach, and teaching is the professional's commitment.

Occasionally, a nonprofessional is heard to issue a threat in such situations, as in the statement "If you don't let Robin have a turn, you won't go to the zoo with us on Friday." There are several problems with threats. One is that they are often empty. Will the threatener really keep Leslie away from the zoo? How does one make the threatened sanction match the seriousness of the unwanted behavior? Sometimes the threats are out of proportion to the transgression. Then, when a really serious transgression comes along, what threats are left? Perhaps most 4-year-olds cannot yet sense that threats indicate that the adult has lost or given up control over the situation. But some 4-year-olds do have this awareness. If so, their testing behavior is apt to increase, and the content of the relationships in the class becomes focused on the rules, on what happens when they are broken, and on who is really in charge. When the content of relationships is dominated by such matters, the atmosphere becomes a highly contentious one. Furthermore, threats do not

teach the children alternative skills for solving the problem, nor do they encourage new knowledge or strengthen desirable dispositions.

Some adults resort to "bribery" in situations like the example given. They may say something like, "If you give Robin a turn with the tricycle, I will let you hand out the cookies at snack time." The danger in using a bribe is that it tends to devalue the behavior in which one wishes the child to engage. In other words, the generosity and charity are discounted as not being worth engaging in for their own sakes. Bribery often "works." The professional question is, however, What does it teach?

Some adults use so-called "time-out" procedures in the case of a child's persistent refusal to cooperate with other children. Time-out procedures often seem to "work." Indeed, many teachers are trained to use them. The main problem is that time-out procedures do not teach new skills or desirable dispositions, although they do change behavior. As long as the child's mental ability is reasonably normal for his or her age, it is not necessary to circumvent the mind by insisting on something like a time-out chair. Furthermore, the cognitive connection between placing one's seat on a particular chair and acceding to another child's request for a turn with a piece of equipment must be fairly obscure if not confusing to a 4-year-old (cf. Katz, 1977-a).

Many adults moralize about the virtues of "sharing," kindness, and generosity, preaching the evils of selfishness in such predicaments. Though such approaches are unlikely to do children harm, they are not likely to teach various strategies to use when adults are not present--especially if moralizing is used to the exclusion of all other methods.

Another common response of adults without training is to become preoccupied with the feelings and needs of the "victim" and to neglect the

feelings, needs, and development of the child who seems to be the "aggressor." The professional, on the other hand, is committed to responding to the feelings, needs, and development of all the children in her charge.

It has been reported that some untrained adults, when confronting situations like the hypothetical tricycle squabble, would say to Leslie such things as, "Your behavior makes me sad," or "Your acting that way makes me feel bad." While such statements are unlikely to harm the children, they seem to draw attention to the adult's own internal states and perhaps add a layer of guilt to the child's feelings. Again, however, the basic problem with this response is that it fails to teach the participants ways of coping with the predicament.

Finally, the nonprofessional person in such a situation is apt to employ not only common sense but also impulse, customs, or erroneous folktales. The danger also exists that this individual may occasionally use shaming comparisons with other children in order to intimidate a child so that he or she will give in to the adult's demand.

UNPROFESSIONAL RESPONSES TO THE INCIDENT

One of the characteristics of a fully developed profession is that its members subscribe to a code of ethics that serves as a guide to professional conduct (cf. Katz, 1977-b). Conduct violating any part of the code is unethical and therefore "unprofessional." Behavior which is nonprofessional is that which is determined by personal predeliction or common-sense wisdom rather than by professionally accrued knowledge and practices; unprofessional behavior is that which contravenes agreed-upon standards of performance of the society of professional practitioners and the code of ethical conduct they have adopted.

In general, unprofessional behavior is the result of giving in to the temptations of the situation at hand. It could be, for instance, that Leslie and/or Robin's behavior frequently puts the teacher into the kind of predicament described in this discussion. On a given occasion, the teacher might feel a bit weary of it and stand by and let the chips fall where they may. Once in a while, she might silently pray that an aggressive child in this kind of situation will "get what he or she deserves," hoping that another child will bring the offender down a peg or two. Not only is it unethical to let one's own feelings dictate the response to the situation, but the school of "hard knocks," although powerful, is likely to provide the wrong lessons to children. From the school of "hard knocks," most children learn to be hard.

It should be kept in mind that the professionally trained teacher is not without feelings of the kind alluded to here; what is professional in this situation is to "school" one's feelings with the knowledge and insight that constitutes professional judgment and to respond in terms of that judgment rather than in terms of the feelings or temptations of the moment. Occasionally, we are tempted to blame the children for creating the predicament or to blame their parents for not raising them properly. However, what is relevant is not whom to blame but what to teach in this situation.

CONCLUSION

I have used the example of a typical incident arising in groups of young children to illustrate professional and nonprofessional ways of responding to them. Professional responses include the use of judgment based on the most reliable knowledge and insight available. The untrained person responds personally rather than professionally in such situations.

Only a very small sample of the potential uses of contemporary knowledge about children's development and learning has been discussed here. However, it is hoped that even this brief description of what mature professionalism in preschool teaching is like will add weight to the proposition that the effective training and education of preprimary teachers can help to make a significant contribution to children's development and learning.

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